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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001319

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2019  
TAGS: PGOV KS  
SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT KIM DAE-JUNG'S OBITUARY

REF: SEOUL 1301 (KDJ'S FUNERAL DELEGATION)

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former Republic of Korea President Kim Dae-jung died of complications from pneumonia on August 18 in Seoul. He was 83. The funeral is tentatively planned for August 25. Kim's staff told poloffs on August 14 that Kim's family hoped Vice President Biden or Secretary Clinton would head a funeral delegation. Kim was President from 1998-2003 and in 2000 received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his struggle for democracy and human rights in South Korea and his efforts at reconciliation with North Korea. A close friend of the United States, he played a historic role in Korea's democratization. His "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea marked a profound shift in South Korean sentiment toward North Korea and transformed inter-Korean relations.  
End Summary

¶2. (C) Former President Kim Dae-jung died in Seoul on August 18 at 1:43 PM after being hospitalized on July 13 with pneumonia. His wife, three sons, their families, and several of his former aides were at his bedside. The funeral is tentatively scheduled for August 25. Kim's Senior Secretary told poloffs on August 14 that the family hoped Vice President Biden or Secretary Clinton would head a funeral delegation (Reftel).

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A VETERAN DISSIDENT  
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¶3. (U) Kim Dae-jung was born on December 3, 1925 on Haui-do, an impoverished island in Jeolla province, southwestern Korea. He graduated from Mokpo Commercial High School in 1943 and ran his own shipping business before entering politics in 1954.

¶4. (U) Kim made several unsuccessful bids for the National Assembly before winning a seat in 1961. His first-term was short-lived however, as a military coup led by Major General Park Chung-hee dissolved the National Assembly three days after the election. Undeterred, Kim ran again in 1963, won, and went on to serve three consecutive terms.

¶5. (U) A dynamic speaker and charismatic personality, Kim rose to national prominence when he spearheaded the 1969 parliamentary effort to block Park Chung-hee from an unconstitutional third term as President. The effort failed, but Kim gained enough political momentum to run as the 1971 New Democratic Party presidential candidate against Park. Kim ran a strong campaign but eventually lost to Park, who used obstructionist tactics and illegal electioneering practices.

¶6. (U) Following the 1971 election, Kim became the target of intense political persecution. Besides being arrested and

jailed on numerous occasions, Kim survived at least five assassination attempts and a kidnapping in Japan by the KCIA before being sentenced to death for allegedly inciting the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. After Washington intervened, Korean authorities commuted Kim's sentence to exile in the U.S., and he was a research fellow at Harvard University from 1983-84.

**¶17. (U)** Upon his return to Seoul in 1985, Kim resumed an influential role in the nation's growing democratization movement. In 1987, Kim ran for the presidency in a three-way race against rival dissident Kim Young-sam and President Chun Doo-hwan's hand-picked successor, General Roh Tae-woo. With neither Kim bowing out, the two split the pro-democracy vote and handed Roh the victory. In 1992, Kim Dae-jung ran again for the presidency and lost to Kim Young-sam in a close three-way race divided along Korea's regional electoral fault lines.

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THE 15TH PRESIDENT OF THE ROK

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**¶18. (U)** In December 1997, in the midst of the Asian financial crisis, Kim was elected president of the Republic of Korea on a platform of economic reform and inter-Korean reconciliation. His victory gave the leftists their first presidency and marked the first peaceful transfer of power between the rival parties. Instead of starting his term with the political retaliation typical of incoming presidents, Kim chose to pardon former presidents and release political prisoners.

**¶19. (U)** By the time Kim took office in February 1998, the Asian Financial Crisis had pushed South Korea to the brink of bankruptcy, and Kim needed to take drastic steps to restore faith in the Korean economy. He took on a USD 58 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund; pushed strongly for the development of a high-tech industry; restructured banking, business, and labor practices; and cut the knot between business and government, going so far as to rewrite campaign finance laws to allow for more transparency. Within a year, Kim had paid back the loan, and Korea's economy emerged as one of Asia's strongest.

**¶110. (U)** Kim was also active on the foreign relations front. In October 1998 he met Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi to alleviate historic animosity between the two countries and declare a new era of partnership. With an eye on North Korea, Kim also strengthened ties with the United States, China, and Russia, and South Korea took on a greater role as a regional leader.

**¶111. (U)** Kim Dae-jung's policy of engagement with North Korea, the "Sunshine Policy," separated politics from economic assistance, broke taboos, and marked a profound shift in South Korean sentiment toward the North. On June 15, 2000, he traveled to Pyongyang for a historic summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, the first meeting between the leaders of the two Koreas. The resulting Joint Declaration allowed for reunions between divided families, the construction of a trans-Peninsula railroad, and a joint tourist destination at Mt. Kumgang in the North.

**¶112. (C)** Kim Dae-jung's efforts to promote South-North reconciliation and his leadership in the democratization of South Korea earned him international recognition, including the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately, Kim's success was sullied in 2003 by revelations that Seoul had provided Pyongyang with hundreds of millions of dollars in cash and other economic cooperation in exchange for the North's agreement to the South-North Summit. Also, in 2002, two of Kim's sons and several of his aides were arrested for corruption. Nevertheless, Kim's Nobel Prize and compelling personal history cemented his status as an international figure and Korea's standard-bearer of progressive politics.

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¶13. (C) Kim Dae-jung continued to wield significant influence in progressive circles even after his retirement. He often played a kingmaker role in both regional and presidential elections, and was seen as the elder statesman to be consulted with for all progressive candidates. By May 2009, however, his power within the Democratic Party (DP) had begun to wane. The DP candidates for National Assembly seats in his native Jeolla province, Kim Geun-sik and Lee Kwang-cheol, were handily beaten by independents Chung Dong-young (72.3 percent of the vote) and Shin Gunn (50.4 percent) -- despite Kim Dae-jung's endorsement. Moreover, the May 2009 suicide of Kim's progressive presidential successor, Roh Moo-hyun, facilitated a resurgence of pro-Roh lawmakers within the DP, further sidelining those loyal to Kim Dae-jung.

¶14. (U) Kim leaves behind the Asia-Pacific Peace Foundation, a think tank he established to advance of North-South reconciliation, and the Kim Dae-jung Presidential Library at Yonsei University.

¶15. (U) He is survived by his wife, Lee Hee-ho, and three sons, one of whom, Kim Hong-up, is a prominent politician himself.

TOKOLA